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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000401

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 IS UNITED, SAYS HARIRI

REF: BEIRUT 00304

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Meeting with the Ambassador April 3, the day after an off-the-record meeting of March 14 leaders, Sunni leader Saad Hariri said the March 14 coalition had agreed on candidate lists in several key districts, including Chouf, Aley, and Baabda, but work remained to be done. Hariri said Druze leader Jumblatt was still with March 14 "for now" and assessed that much of Jumblatt's outreach to Shia and Druze opposition leaders aimed to protect his small Druze community. Although Hariri indicated the deal for the Tripoli electoral list would be finalized later that day during a meeting with Sunni leaders Safadi and Mikati, Embassy contacts report that the leaders have, to date, failed to reach full agreement.

2. (C) Hariri said if Prime Minister Siniora refused to pursue a candidacy in Sidon, the Future Movement would select another candidate to run there with incumbent MP Bahia Hariri (Saad's aunt). Hariri he opposed a joint list with the opposition in Sidon. Hariri also said he was unsurprised by Tashnaq's official April 1 declaration of support for the opposition. According to Hariri, March 14 leaders agreed that Future Movement Christian member Ghattas Khoury would not represent March 14 in the Chouf. On the Constitutional Council, Hariri noted the need to fill the remaining seats but expressed his opposition to the appointment of "Hizballah thugs." End summary.

THE MEETING THAT
NEVER TOOK PLACE

3. (C) In a April 3 meeting with the Ambassador, Sunni Future Movement leader Saad Hariri -- visibly tired -- said things were "much better" in the March 14 coalition following his meeting at Qoreitem the previous evening with key March 14 leaders. Hariri claimed, however, that he had "forced" the meeting on his nominal allies, Kataeb head Amine Gemayel, Lebanese Forces (LF) head Samir Geagea, and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. The four publicly denied the meeting took place in order to resolve their issues out of the spotlight,

Hariri said. According to Hariri, March 14 lists for Chouf, Aley, and Baabda districts were complete, although other lists remained in flux. (Note: Several news outlets prominently featured the late-night meeting in spite of the leaders' efforts to keep the meeting "secret." End note.)

14. (C) On the eve of Future Movement's April 5 electoral convention, Hariri described himself as "cautiously optimistic" -- stressing "cautiously" -- regarding March 14 electoral prospects. Hariri expected Future's April 5 party convention -- during which he planned to reveal Future's political, economic, and social platforms -- to be a success. (Note: Hariri was poised and impressive during the April 5 Convention and stressed support for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and adherence to UNSCRs 1559 and 1701 during his comments. End note.)

JUMBLATT: MARCH 14
"FOR NOW"

15. (C) Druze leader Walid Jumblatt acted "pro-March 14" during the April 2 meeting of coalition leaders, Hariri said, despite Jumblatt's recent statements reaching out to Hizballah and Druze opposition leader Talal Arslan that some have viewed as counter to coalition goals. Jumblatt was with March 14 "for now," Hariri claimed, with a note of uncertainty. (Note: Meanwhile, Jumblatt publicly revealed April 5 he had abandoned his candidates for three electoral seats in order to maintain unity among March 14 forces. On television, Jumblatt appeared disappointed by the exclusion

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of his candidates but supported the March 14 lists. End note.)

16. (C) Hariri described tensions between Druze and Shia communities as high after a member of Jumblatts' party was killed following the February 14 commemoration of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Hariri acknowledged coalition "sensitivities" about dialogue between Jumblatt and opposition-allied Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, but defended Jumblatt's actions, saying they were necessary to maintain peace between the Druze and Shia in Lebanon. Jumblatt April 5 declared his intentions to resume direct communication with Hizballah officials.

AGREEMENT ON KHOURY

17. (C) Hariri noted that all four March 14 leaders agreed that Future member and former Future Christian MP Ghattas Khoury would be excluded from the March 14 list in the Chouf, in favor of LF candidate George Adwan. (Note: Khoury, a long-time Hariri ally, caused an uproar within March 14 ranks when he declared his candidacy without Hariri's backing. Amal Mudalalli, Hariri's press advisor, assessed Khoury had made a "big mistake" with the move. End note.)

TRIPOLI DEAL
NEEDS WORK

18. (C) Although Hariri told the Ambassador the Tripoli electoral list would be completed later that day after a meeting with former Prime Minister Najib Mikati and Minister of Economy and Trade Mohammed Safadi, agreement has not yet been reached. Hariri said he had a deal with Mikati and Safadi to run with his candidate in Tripoli, but, according to Tripoli contacts, Mikati and Safadi insisted on taking two seats each in Tripoli, leaving four slots for Future. Hariri reportedly was unwilling to accept fewer than six seats. Regarding security in Tripoli, Hariri told the Ambassador April 3 the situation in Tripoli was quiet. Constant complaining by Tripoli MP Mosbah al Ahdab about security in the area, however, was "becoming a headache," Hariri said.

NO JOINT LIST
IN SIDON

¶9. (C) Hariri said either Prime Minister Siniora or another pro-March 14 candidate would run with his aunt, Minister of Education Bahia Hariri, in Sidon. Unlike 2005, March 14 would not support a joint list with opposition figure Ossama Saad and Minister Hariri for Sidon's two seats.

TASHNAQ NOT
AN OPTION

¶10. (C) Hariri told the Ambassador he never believed that Metn Christian politico Michel Murr could deliver the Armenian Tashnaq party to March 14. (Note: Tashnaq April 1 officially gave up efforts to make an electoral deal with Hariri and allied with the opposition and its Christian leader Michel Aoun. Tashnaq MP Hagop Pakardunian told Pol/Econ Chief and Senior Political LES March 26 that Hariri had proposed giving Tashnaq four seats in parliament. In return, Tashnaq would have to publicly break its alliance with Aoun and support March 14 lists in Beirut 1, Metn, and Zahle. Pakardunian called a public break with Aoun an "impossible task" and argued the deal proposed by Hariri was unbalanced in favor of March 14. End note.)

¶11. (C) Additionally, Geagea at the April 4 LF convention revealed his party's candidates, which included a non-Tashnaq Armenian Catholic for Beirut 1 district. (Note: Geagea's move suggested a lack of coordination among March 14 leaders regarding Armenian seats. Geagea's nomination ignored Hariri ally and current Beirut 1 MP Serge Torsarkissian, who had

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been mentioned for the slot. End note.)

CONSTITUTIONAL
COUNCIL SHOULD
BE FILLED

¶12. (C) On the Constitutional Council, Hariri said he refused to accept "Hizballah thugs" in the five remaining seats on the Council, but argued that the seats should be filled. (Note: Prime Minister Siniora told the Ambassador separately that leaving the seats empty was a palatable solution. End note.)

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Although March 14 seems to be progressing well on electoral list formation, several key districts -- Tripoli and Metn among them -- are still under construction. The deadline for candidate registration is April 7, but electoral lists can be amended until election day.

¶14. (C) The April 2 meeting of March 14 leaders was a positive development and indicates coalition persistence in coordinating electoral lists. Hariri's caveat of "for now" regarding Druze leader Jumblatt's loyalty to March 14 is worrisome, but Jumblatt over the weekend seemed willing to accept electoral setbacks for PSP to advance coalition goals. End comment.

SISON